TOWARD A NEW U.S. STRATEGY IN ASIA

by

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Uzbekistan has announced that it will offer U.S. forces a base for operations in Afghanistan, and that it does not rule out the possibility of a permanent base if needed. The importance of this cannot be overestimated. Both Russia and China hoped America's incursion into Central Asia was temporary and would end when the terrorism threat abated. Instead, it appears the United States will remain a major player there, not only countering terrorism but also maintaining access to large energy deposits, preserving options for democratizing these states, and establishing a global power projection capability.

This last objective is new. Whereas the others are long-standing goals of U.S. policy, maintaining an effective global power projection capability stems from the strategic watershed triggered by September 11, 2001, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As those wars revealed, U.S. military forces can now achieve something unprecedented in military history, namely they can project and sustain sea-based and air-based power into Central Asia. This unprecedented capability allows the United States to project and sustain power anywhere in Asia from anywhere else in Asia, from the Middle East to the Pacific, with virtual impunity, constituting a veritable strategic revolution. Central Asia and the Caucasus, where the accompanying over flight rights and logistics infra-structure are maintained, are critical components of this strategy.

Equally clear is that America is dramatically strengthening its power projection capability throughout Asia and seeking allies there. The United States has begun talks with India on extending to it a missile defense umbrella and on an as yet unspecified Asian collective security organization. Washington also steadily has strengthened military ties with Japan, Southeast Asian states, and Australia. Thus the determination to retain access to Central Asia meshes with America’s overall strategy.

American bases in the former Soviet Union likewise are tied to the revamping of the U.S. global basing posture. When completed, this posture will lend itself to a radically new emphasis on power projection by smaller but effective and lethal expeditionary forces. Those forces will move from large NATO-style bases to smaller, more austere facilities situated not only around the former Soviet Union’s periphery, but also closer to theaters where conflict is likely in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, more generally.

These will be known as forward operating bases (FOBs) or forward operating locations (FOLs), with the latter being the closest to the theater of operations and the former becoming like logistical or command and control centers for those contingencies. Many of them will be manned by small groups of forces who will prepare those facilities for hosting forces in the event of a contingency. So long as peacetime access is ensured, U.S. presence in these facilities will be relatively minimal, if it even exists.

Uzbekistan exemplifies this emerging trend. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has for now ruled out a permanent U.S. base, but it is clear that what the Pentagon wants is the opportunity for unimpeded access to Central Asia in the event of future emergencies once the war on terror is over. That approach tallies with the overall restructuring of our basing structure and transformation of the U.S. military into a more expeditionary force because the key point here is the assurance of rapid access, not necessarily the acquisition of permanently deployed forces or permanent bases. Instead, through increased security assistance and regular security dialogues with Central Asian states, Washington hopes to exercise a permanent military influence there.

However, this evolving strategy raises new issues. Beyond fighting global terrorism, it has the effect of restricting, if not containing, Chinese and Russian military ambitions. Moreover, the advent of this capability is also joined to a broader drive to establish a new structure of Asian alliances. Although the implications of these plans for new alliances have not yet been felt, clearly they are part of the most fundamental reorientation of U.S. national security strategy in decades.

It is yet to be seen if these moves are strategically, politically and financially sustainable given the pressures now operating on the U.S. society and military. The creation of this global presence and its accompanying capability to monitor global developments and react quickly to them as objectives of U.S. policy are already visible. It remains an open question, though, as to whether this new strategy will further aggravate the already widespread opposition to American ambitions we encounter in China, Russia, and elsewhere. Additionally, we cannot yet know whether the public, becoming aware of the strategy, will pay for it or if our economy can sustain the strategy's goals. Moreover, given the current pressures on military manpower, is this strategy viable in terms of meeting strategic objectives? In an age of asymmetric warfare, reconstructing failed states will invariably be America's real strategic objective in any war we fight. Hence the so-called post-conflict phase is a misnomer as we now see in Afghanistan and Iraq—and such conflicts consume manpower. For this new strategy to succeed, many more resources than currently are being allocated must be invested. Otherwise U.S. ends and means will remain asymmetrical or out of equilibrium. In that case we can easily foresee that the strategic consequences of this disequlibrium will not be long in coming, and not just in Central Asia.